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RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6306
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1540
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0489
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000357

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/25/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV ODIP KDEM AG

SUBJECT: DECODING PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS LEAKS ATTACKING
THE EMBASSY

REF: A. 07 ALGIERS 1658

1B. ALGIERS 293

1C. ALGIERS 27

1D. ALGIERS 274

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The publisher of an Arabic-language daily told the Ambassador on March 24 that the paper's March 22 front page story alleging that the Ambassador had refused to appear at the MFA when convoked by the Foreign Minister was printed as a result of direct pressure from the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry of Communications. He told the Ambassador that Belkhadem is waging a media campaign against the Embassy and the Ambassador to reinforce his own position within the flagship National Liberation Front (FLN) party, which is currently facing serious divisions (ref A). Another well-connected FLN source told us the same thing March 23. Meanwhile, a well-placed Interior Ministry contact told us on March 23 that Interior Minister Noureddine Yazid Zerhouni never issued written instructions forbidding organizations from meeting with the Embassy (ref B), but that Belkhadem was irritated by several of the Ambassador's meetings, notably one with the FLN-linked organization whose director sought to use the Ambassador's elevated profile to boost his status to Belkhadem's detriment. The Interior Ministry source, meanwhile, also indicated concern with our ready access to the media. Like their military counterparts, Algerian political leaders are hardly transparent. Only as we expanded our contacts did we discover how bitter the divisions within the FLN truly are. Mindful of the visit of staunch political opposition leader Said Sadi to the US earlier this month, Belkhadem appears worried that we will shift to oppose directly and publicly Belkhadem's plan to amend the constitution and promote President Bouteflika for a third term. We are toning down our media outreach for a few weeks while we keep sending the message to the GoA that we are not taking a specific position for or against constitutional amendments and/or third term for President Bouteflika. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On March 22, El Djazair News featured front page headlines accusing Ambassador Ford of refusing to appear at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after being summoned to justify the Embassy's recent press statement concerning meetings with NGOs and political party representatives. The article cited "sources" at the MFA who said "the government of Algeria is concerned about the U.S. Ambassador's persistence in meeting with civil society leaders and

political party representatives, in spite of Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem's warnings not to do so." On March 24, Ahmeda Ayachi, the publisher of El Djazair News, asked to see the Ambassador and told him that his editor-in-chief was called directly by the Prime Minister's office and the Ministry of Communication with instructions to run the story "criticizing Ambassador Ford." Ayachi ensured that his editor also ran the Embassy's official denial in the story. (Comment: Major Algerian newspapers on March 23 ran our press release officially denying the Djazair News story claiming the Ambassador had been convoked. End Comment.)

¶3. (C) Interior Ministry Communications Adviser Miloud Baghdadi on March 23 offered us further insight into the recent government press campaign. Baghdad said that he had no official documents providing instructions forbidding organizations from meeting with the Embassy because, contrary to press reports, "there were none." Baghdad also hinted that much of this was directed at Ambassador Ford, commenting that he "had never seen an Ambassador in direct contact with so many journalists on his cell phone." Baghdad mentioned two specific meetings in particular that annoyed Prime Minister Belkhadem. The first was the Ambassador's meeting with Children of the Martyrs organization director Khaled Bounejma on February 17, and the second was the Ambassador and DCM's visit on March 8 to senior FLN official Salih Boujil. Meanwhile, another high-ranking FLN contact told Ambassador on March 22 that the March 8 meeting between the Ambassador and Boujil had created a stir, since Boujil had ignored Belkhadem's instructions not to do the meeting. This other FLN source added that the visit of prominent Algerian political opposition figure Said Sadi to the U.S. earlier in March, and Sadi's very public broadsides against the Algerian

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government while there, suggested to the Prime Minister and other officials that the Americans may be taking Sadi's side against the GoA.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: Like their military counterparts, Algerian political leaders are hardly transparent. Only as we pushed harder to expand our contacts did we discover how bitter the divisions within the FLN truly are. The Ambassador's meetings with the Children of the Martyrs director and his meeting with senior FLN politico Boujil appear to have demonstrated Belkhadem's weak control over the FLN. Bounejma's organization allegedly has close informal ties to the FLN and any organization pertaining to the families of War of Liberation veterans retains powerful symbolic value (hence, our desire to know them). Our contacts tell us that Bounejma, whose extreme initial eagerness to meet with the Ambassador raised our eyebrows and caused us to postpone the meeting and change the venue, sought to demonstrate his own increased clout within the FLN by courting the U.S. Ambassador without reference to the Prime Minister. The Boujil meeting did the same thing. It is especially ironic that the March 8 meeting with FLNer Boujil annoyed Belkhadem since the entire point of the meeting on our side was to send a message to Belkhadem - in his role as FLN leader - that we were not taking sides in the political debates here.

¶5. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: In addition, our constant access to the press highlighting our expanding cooperation programs has shown Belkhadem and Interior Minister Zerhouni (no friend of expanded liberties himself) that they don't completely control the media messaging, and that we could level a painful attack against the constitution amendment and third term if we wanted to do so. The visit to the U.S. of political opposition leader Sadi, although entirely private and at Sadi's initiative mainly to raise money among Algerian expats, likely added to Belkhadem's concerns. Taken together, these vignettes paint a picture of a prime minister not fully secure with influence and nervous about talking to us. Newspaper publisher Ayachi opined to the Ambassador on March 22 that there is a possibility that Belkhadem could lose his job if a cabinet reshuffle occurs as rumored around

April 8. From our vantage point, we doubt that President Bouteflika has lost confidence in his prime minister. Therefore, we expect Belkhadem to prevail in the argument about amending the constitution and moving Bouteflika towards a third term. Belkhadem might well even be named vice president in a new government under an amended constitution, although that seems still very undecided. In any case, we will scale back our media outreach for a time and keep sending the message through various channels that we are not taking a specific position for or against a constitution amendment and/or third term for Bouteflika.

FORD